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Pentagon panel says less trust, more checks to stop spies

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A Pentagon commission yesterday recommended a "substantial" expansion of the use of polygraph exams as a means of detecting and deterring potential Soviet spies among the ranks of the American military.

The recommendation, made by a special commission established in the wake of disclosures about the Walker spy ring, is one of a range of suggested security countermeasures aimed at making it difficult for Soviet and East-bloc agents to recruit American military personnel.

The suggestions include reducing the number of government workers with clearances, reducing the amount of classified information, beefing up background investigations of government workers, and imposing a new system of controls on employees working with military codes and communications equipment.

In all, the commission made some 28 specific recommendations.

The report represents the administration's most comprehensive statement yet concerning how the United States can best protect its secrets.

"While no system of security can provide foolproof protection against espionage, it can make espionage more difficult to undertake and more difficult to accomplish without detection," the report says.

"In this respect, DoD's [Department of Defense] current security program falls short of providing as much assurance as it might that the nation's defense secrets are protected," the report added.

In recent months, a Navy seaman, a former Navy chief petty officer, two former Navy officers, a Navy civilian intelligence analyst, and a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent have faced espionage charges in federal court. In addition, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employee is currently an international fugitive on charges that he turned over sensitive US information to the Soviets.

The commission report warns that the Soviets, their allies, and other hostile nations continue to conduct "massive and highly organized intelligence-gathering operations" in the United States.

"There are hundreds of contacts with suspected intelligence agents reported by Defense Department personnel and contractors every year," the report says.

According to the report, there are an estimated 3.8 million workers with Defense Department clearances. Each year, these workers produce some 16 million new classified documents, adding to some 100 million classified records already in Defense Department files. Additional classified information is stored in an estimated 16,000 computers.

While most of the commission's recommendations will not require congressional approval, the most controversial measure — wider use of polygraph tests — does.

The commission wants Congress to give the secretary of defense authority to expand and organize his own polygraph counterintelligence program. Congress has kept the Pentagon on a short leash on the polygraph issue, authorizing a limited pilot program this year to conduct 3,500 counterintelligence polygraph exams. That may change in the wake of the Walker spy case.

"The commission is convinced that the counterintelligence-scope polygraph is the primary technique currently available to the department which offers any realistic promise of detecting penetrations of its classified programs by hostile intelligence services," the commission report says.

It adds, "Even the possibility of having to take such examinations will provide a powerful deterrent to those who might otherwise consider espionage."

The program would include two parts: regular tests for those workers with access to the most sensitive US programs; and random polygraph tests for other employees with secret and top-secret clearances.

Continuing access to classified information would apparently depend on passing the polygraph exam.

The commission is headed by retired Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, who, prior to his retirement earlier this year, was one of the Pentagon's most vocal supporters of the wider use of polygraph tests to help weed out potential Soviet moles in sensitive US government jobs.

Both the CIA and the National Security Agency have long required employees to take polygraph exams as a counterintelligence safeguard.

Until the Walker spy scandal last summer, Congress was reluctant to endorse the broad use of polygraphs for fear that it would trample the rights of Defense Department employees. Some experts have estimated polygraph accuracy at 75 to 90 percent, but others question those figures.

More recently, the case of Soviet KGB defector Vitaly Yurchenko has raised questions about the effectiveness of polygraph tests. He was said to have passed all his tests with flying colors. Nonetheless, now that he has returned to Moscow, some government officials are speculating that he was really a double agent on an intelligence mission for the Soviet KGB.